



GROWTH

At The

YOM TOV TABLE

SIMCHAT TORAH

Double-Sided!

The Genesis of Freedom

On Simchat Torah, Jewish communities worldwide read the very last Parsha of the Torah and immediately refresh by starting back from the very beginning. In starting anew, I wanted to share the following beautiful insights that relate to the very beginning itself.

The Torah begins with 4 stories: Adam & Eve, Cain & Hevel, Noach & the Flood, and the Tower of Bavel. What are they really about? Why are they there? The story that dominates the Torah – G-d's covenant with the Children of Israel and its tempestuous history – does not begin until Genesis 12 with G-d's call to Avraham to leave his father's house. What, then, is the function of the first 11 chapters?

R' Jonathan Sacks [1] undertook a legendary and beautiful approach in exploring the depth behind these stories, explaining how they collectively represent a search for meaning in history. They are, in fact, a philosophical drama in four acts, a sustained and tightly constructed exploration of the concept of responsibility.

Act I is set in the Garden of Eden: Adam, Eve, and paradise. After G-d confronts them for eating the forbidden fruit, the first human instinct is denial. The man blames the woman. By implication he blames G-d as well. It was, after all, He Who made her, He Who decided that 'It is not good for man to be alone.' We hear for the first time a proposition that has undergone many transformations but always with the same conclusion: "I am not responsible; I am not to blame." The fault may lie in our stars, our socioeconomic class, early childhood traumas, the configuration of our genes, or the several other varieties of determinism – each of which denies the freedom of human action. Never one to be outdone, the woman repeats the strategy: "The serpent deceived me and I ate" (Gen. 3:13). She too declares herself innocent – the victim not the perpetrator, the deceived not the self-deceived. The Torah describes this as 'hiding.' When Adam and Eve hide themselves among the trees, they are acting out of a psychological state: shame seeking concealment.

Only on the most superficial reading is this about a tree. It is about the birth of ethical life. G-d had given humanity His greatest gift: that of freedom itself. Unique among created beings, humans have creative capability. But freedom has limits.

Without limits, freedom for the strong means slavery for the weak. Freedom for the rich means misery for the poor. That is the point of the command about the tree. The limits of nature are about what we *can* do. The limits G-d places on humankind are about ethics: what we *may* do.

The birth of the moral imperative – command, prohibition – occurs at the moment that humans are first capable of understanding that with freedom comes responsibility. Only a free agent can understand a moral law, and only a free agent can break one. This, the Torah intimates, is never without consequences – for which we are responsible. That is the knowledge conveyed by the fruit of the tree. To break a law is to taste forbidden fruit and know that one has strayed into the territory called 'evil,' however harmless the first steps are.

This is what Adam and Eve simultaneously experience and deny. The depth and originality of the story is not that they sinned but its insight into the psychodynamics of self-deception. Their first instinct is to deny that they were acting freely at all. They deny personal responsibility.

With the second act, the human drama descends into tragedy. Two human children have been born and with them, sibling rivalry. They both bring offerings to G-d. Hevel's is accepted, Cain's is not. Reading Cain's indignant thoughts, G-d responds, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:6-7). This is a speech that connects precisely with the previous act. G-d closes the instinctive route of escape to deny personal responsibility as Cain's parents had attempted. Nonetheless, Cain kills Hevel. "Am I my brother's keeper?" he responds. He doesn't deny personal responsibility. Instead, he denies something else – namely, *moral* responsibility. He acted, and acted freely, but sees no reason why he should be held to account for what he did. After all, he is not his brother's keeper. Adam claimed that his will was powerless before the world as it acted on him in the form of his wife. Cain believes the opposite – that the world is powerless before his will. That we are entitled to do as we choose, and conscience does not impose constraints. Cain's view of religion is both ancient and very modern: it is there to serve us, we are not here to serve it.

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Refuah Sheleimah, b'toch she'ar cholei Yisrael:

Ariel Ben Frida Rachamim Ben Shifra Noah Yisrael Ben Victoria Yaffa Liraz Tzvi Ben Sara Yehudit Avigayil Bat Tehilah
Miriam Bat Bakol Frida Bat Yaffa Yitzchak Ben Naama Esther Bat Frida Michael Ben Devorah Moshe Ben Moriah

In mythic cultures, religious ritual is a way of placating, appeasing, or manipulating their idols – getting them to do what they wanted them to do. The idea that someone might offer a sacrifice to G-d and hear the answer “no” is deeply shocking to Cain – and that is why his sacrifice is rejected. Cain has performed all the right moves, only to discover that G-d is not a force to be cajoled or a power to be placated. G-d sees the heart, and refuses to be manipulated.

Having failed to impose his will on G-d, Cain inflicts it on Hevel in the most ultimate form, by murdering him. Cain does not fear freedom. On the contrary, he relishes it. What he fears is someone *else's* freedom. His denial of accountability stems from a denial of not personal, but moral responsibility.

Act III brings us to Noah and the flood, one of the strangest cases in the Torah. We are introduced to him in terms of unrivaled praise, yet the last glimpse we have of him is unforgettable and tragic. The hero of humanity has ended up an embarrassment to his children. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge; Noah drank from the tree of oblivion. Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed; Noah is naked and unashamed. It is his two sons who are ashamed to look at him.

The Sages heard in the phrase “righteous in his generations” a subtle criticism. Relative to his generation he was righteous, but in absolute terms he was not. Told that there would be a flood and that he should build an ark, he busied himself in the labor. The text goes out of its way to emphasize his obedience, stating no less than three times that Noah did “exactly as G-d had commanded him.” Throughout the whole of the narrative – the warning, the ark-building, the animal-gathering, the beginning of the rain – Noah says nothing. The silence, in contrast with the dialogues Adam and Cain had with G-d, is unmistakable. Noah's failure is that, righteous in himself, he has no impact on his contemporaries. He does not engage with them, nor does he pray for them. In Jewish folklore Noah became a ‘tzaddik in a fur coat.’ There are two ways of keeping warm on a cold night: buying a fur coat or lighting a fire. *Buy a coat and you keep yourself warm; light a fire and you keep others warm also.*

You cannot survive while the rest of the world drowns and still survive. After the Holocaust, the phenomenon was given a name: survivor guilt. Noah is the first intimation in the Torah that individual righteousness is not always enough. To be moral is to live with and for others: sharing their responsibility, participating in their suffering, protesting their wrongs, and arguing their cause. Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. One who saves only himself, even himself he does not save.

Act IV, the Tower of Bavel, is a text of extraordinary compactness, packed with wordplay and literary allusion. Two of the key words, for example, are ‘brick,’ the first manmade building material, and ‘confuse,’ G-d's act of confounding the builders' language so that the project is never completed. The two Hebrew words are mirror images of one another: the Hebrew for ‘brick’ is לבו, for ‘confuse’ is נבל. The reversal of letters

mirrors G-d's inversion of their plans. They wanted to build the city so that they ‘would not be scattered over the face of the earth,’ but the result was that they were ‘scattered over the face of the earth.’ They sought ‘to make a name for ourselves’ and succeeded, but the name they made, Bavel, became a symbol not of creation but confusion. Bavel is a story about the relationship between Heaven and earth. Bavel is what happens when human beings, in full exercise of their creative powers, attempt to build cosmopolis, the city as man-made-universe in which they rule, not G-d.

Aspiring to make their home in Heaven, the builders of Bavel failed to honor the distinction between man and G-d. By aspiring to reach Heaven by technological prowess rather than moral conduct, they discovered that not only do we fail to reach Heaven; we lose our compact nature and unity on earth. Bavel represents the failure of ontological responsibility – the idea that we are accountable to something or someone beyond ourselves. By creating disorder, they inherit disorder.

It is now clear why the Biblical story does not begin with Avraham. The first eleven chapters are not mere series of historical narratives; they are a highly structured exploration of responsibility. First we discover personal responsibility, our freedom to choose. Then we acquire moral responsibility, the knowledge that choice has limits; not everything we can do, may we do. Later we learn collective responsibility: we are part of a family, community, and society, and we have a share in its innocence or guilt. Later still, we realize that society itself is subject to a higher law: there are moral limits to power.

All of this is a prelude to the appearance of Avraham, who does not emerge in a vacuum. His life is a culmination of all that has transpired before. G-d's first command for him to leave his land is a call to personal responsibility. Avraham exercises moral responsibility by entering into battle to rescue Lot. He is his brother's keeper. He scales the heights of collective responsibility when he prays for the inhabitants of Sodom even though he knows that they are mostly wicked, and he reaches ontological responsibility in the trial of Akedat Yitzchak by recognizing the primacy of the Divine word over human emotion and aspiration. In each case, Avraham repairs the failures of previous generations.

The journey to responsibility is long, and there are many temptations to stop short of the final destination. But in the end, there is no real alternative if we are to live our full humanity. Adam loses paradise. Cain is condemned to wander. Noah declines into drunkenness. Bavel is left unbuilt. Responsibility is the very foundation of our freedom; to abandon it is to forfeit treasures far greater than liberty itself. To live responsibly is to stand beside G-d in the eternal act of creation – shaping light from darkness and hope from chaos, one choice at a time.

[1] “To Heal a Fractured World,” p. 135-146